

## **Genderqueer *Twelfth Night*?**

The Shakespeare-themed television comedy *Upstart Crow* ends each episode with the author and his shrewd wife, Ann, pondering events. One programme revolves around the ill-fated performance of a play called 'Eighth Night'. As they smoke their pipes, Ann reassures Will that the time will come when his comedy will be truly appreciated, and he agrees that perhaps his world was not quite ready for a play about gender indeterminacy with a trans central character. Oh, and that *Twelfth Night* might have a better ring to it.

The comic insight, that a play can change or be read differently because the historical context of its reception changes, is a truism about Shakespeare's works. Part of Shakespeare's appeal has been the ability of his plays to speak to issues and concerns that the Elizabethan world could barely have contemplated. His works are thus not primarily windows to some historical past but living theatrical organisms with sometimes surprising relevance to modern concerns. In this article I want to discuss some of the ways in which contemporary understandings of gender might reshape *Twelfth Night*, and to show how our understanding of the play has changed along with social attitudes.

## **Twenty-first century Trans**

In their recent book *Trans Like Me: A Journey for All of Us* (2017), trans activist and musician CN Lester explains the meaning of the key term 'trans': 'any person who, in some way or combinations of ways, has found that how they experience their gendered self does not fit with the gender and sex they were assigned at birth'. Other related terms – genderqueer, androgyny, transgender – all encompass ways 'to live outside of the gender binary'. As the critic Jacqueline Rose describes: 'In addition to 'transition' ('A to B') and 'transitional' ('between A and B'), trans can also mean 'A as well as B' or 'neither A nor B'. 'What is right for me,' writes Lester, is 'a denial of being either a man or a woman, and the embracing of many wonderful things in both of those categories'. It's a way of thinking about gender beyond the categories of male and female that emphasises possibility, agency, and plurality, just as the increasingly common (and contentious) non-gendered pronoun 'they' (as used above) addresses a gender-neutral subject position and works towards a less binary world.

Work such as Lester's has attracted disagreement and sometimes violent disavowal from at least two different directions. One is from conservative ideologies of gender associated with the political right. But the other has been from some prominent feminists whose own views of gender stereotypes are deeply invested in a binary system. Their arguments often fall back on some kind of biologically essentialist definition of what it means to be authentically female, thereby disallowing that trans women are 'real' women. Even within feminism, that's to say, older critical distinctions are no longer sufficient to the exciting challenge posed to gender orthodoxies by the idea and the reality of trans in our own society. There's some conceptual catching up to do. Earlier critique distinguished 'sex' from 'gender'. The term 'sex' was reserved for the (apparently) unchangeable binary of biology – the chromosomes and genitals considered to fix sexual identity as male and female. 'Gender' - 'masculine' or 'feminine' - was the cultural weight of interpretation based on this identity. At the time, this disaggregation of sex and gender was useful in attempting to denaturalise biology and culture (you might be female but that did not confine you to behaving according to culturally sanctioned femininity), but it is a distinction that now seems actually to serve to reinforce gender binaries, and to imprison both bodies and behaviours in restrictive definitions.

### **Trans perspectives on the language of *Twelfth Night***

How might *Twelfth Night* look in the light of this new consciousness of the radical plurality of gendered experience? What if we were to see Viola not as a woman cross-dressing as a man but as a trans character exploring a different expression of gendered identity?

Many trans people identify the developmental importance of finding words to articulate their experience. The language of trans opens up new possibilities for understanding the play. For instance, it's commonly stated that Viola is 'disguised' as a man when she enters Orsino's service in the identity of Cesario. 'Disguise' suggests that the costume is superficial, that it has no impact on her true identity, and that it is assumed for some specific strategic purpose. It would, of course, be absolutely wrong to describe a trans person as being 'disguised'. Viola's own 'such disguise as haply shall become/ The form of my intent' (1.2.57-8) is deeply ambiguous. 'Become' could mean to change into or be suitable to, and 'the form of my intent' could use 'form' literally to suggest Viola's appearance, or more figuratively, as a shape of her plan.

These overlaid meanings make it difficult to be clear whether dressing in male clothing is a means to an end or an end in itself. Viola does not tell us her plans: and, indeed, her instruction 'conceal me what I am' (1.2.56) does not make clear what kind of clothing she is going to adopt. She suggests she will present as 'an eunuch...for I can sing' (1.2.59-60), but she never does so.

Her strange unmotivated remark to the captain suggests that sometimes external appearances are deceiving but that in his case he 'hast a mind that suits/With this thy fair and outward character' (1.2.53-4). This leaves open a gap between internal essence and outward appearance that, in the world of transgender, Lester calls 'social dysphoria'. All in all, this is a curiously fraught encounter, in which Viola's emotions ricochet between her dead brother, the bachelor duke Orsino, and Olivia. There is a good deal going on here that is in excess of putting on a practical disguise, and that seems, in some inarticulated way, to be about Viola herself.

Many accounts of the play get knotted up in pronouns. When Viola as Cesario takes Orsino's wooing messages to an Olivia who is instantly enamoured of the messenger, should we call her (or him) she or he? To call her 'she' suggests that Olivia's attachment is homoerotic, to call her 'he' suggests that Orsino's is. Sometimes criticism tries to 'straighten' out these encounters by imagining a female Cesario in conversation with Orsino and a male one with Olivia. But why try to reallocate into binary categories a set of desires and encounters that insistently exceed that binary? The situation in *Twelfth Night* seems actually to be clarified by that controversial singular pronoun 'they'. Identifying Viola/Cesario as a trans figure best addressed with a gender-neutral pronoun helps to establish them as a consistent figure, even as they crystallise different kinds of desire in their interlocutors.

We could add to this a consciousness of Viola's name. Critics, readers and editors always call the play's central character Viola. But Viola presents in Illyria consistently as Cesario: it is their preferred name for themselves. The name 'Viola' is not been spoken in the play until the fifth act: rather, 'Cesario is your servant's name, fair princess' (3.1.99). It's interesting to read Sebastian's reunion with his twin whom he addresses as 'drownèd Viola' (5.1.253) not simply as the sentimental recognition of the lost sibling. Rather, Sebastian introduces to the play the ambiguous pull of the 'birth name' often used as an insult to trans people and a denial of their preferred identity. He seems to acknowledge a gap between the person he now meets and the person he knew previously: 'Were you a woman, as the rest goes even' (5.1.251).

### **Trans perspectives on the body**

As we have seen, trans consciousness disrupts supposed continuities between bodies and behaviours. The body itself becomes a site of ambiguity rather than certainty: gender fluidity cannot be contained by reference back to the imagined binary of the sexed body. Modern productions of *Twelfth Night* often rely on an ultimately conservative definition of genre by

casting cis female actors in the role of Viola. Trevor Nunn's likeable film of 1996, for instance, has fun with the confusions of gender and desire, but 'reassures' us that the plot is ultimately gender-normative. In this production, Orsino's desire for Cesario is neatly explained and straightened out by the stable gender identity of Imogen Stubbs in the role of Viola. It's not the male-identified Cesario that attracts Orsino, but the female Stubbs, in a conventional rom-com way. This interpretation of the play is common in criticism: it suggests that after the role reversal and gender transgression of the comic plot, order is restored in the form of concluding heterosexual marriages.

We know, however, that the Viola/Cesario for whom Shakespeare wrote the role was a young male actor, whose body multiplied, rather than delimited, the play's genderqueer dynamics. A female Viola dressing and passing as Cesario might be discussed as a trans man, but a male actor dressing as a woman dressing as a man offers something altogether more fluid. Shakespeare plays with this continuing ambiguity at the ending of the play.

Notwithstanding Sebastian's naming his twin as Viola, Cesario does not return to female clothing at the conclusion. In fact, *Twelfth Night* gives us only a few moments of Viola in 1.2; the rest of the play is about Cesario. Readers and critics of the play often work hard to understand Orsino's sudden change of heart, away from Olivia to Cesario, and have trouble articulating the ways this fits a traditional heterosexual romantic comedy conclusion. But perhaps that very difficulty is the point of the play in the twenty-first century. It shouldn't be impossible for us to imagine an Orsino in love not with Viola-in-disguise but precisely, newly, with the trans figure of Cesario who is neither male nor female but 'embracing of many wonderful things in both of those categories', as Lester puts it. Many readings of the play's conclusion are unwilling to engage with its own disregard for binary labels, choosing to anchor the play to a heterosexual worldview by persisting in seeing Cesario's true identity as that of Viola. An awareness of trans allows us to see that this need not be so.

### **Critical traditions**

The speed with which social attitudes to trans issues have changed means that most gender criticism of *Twelfth Night* is already out of date, wedded to old binary ideas that are upturned by the play's plot but not really challenged by it. That gives lots of space for new readings and for reviewing the blind spots of older analyses. For instance, C.L. Barber, writing about *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* in an important analysis from 1959 co-opts the play for a kind of gender

management system: 'The most fundamental distinction the play brings home to us is the difference between men and women [...] the disguising of a girl as a boy in *Twelfth Night* is so exploited as to renew in a special way our sense of the difference.' Barber suggests that gender reversals in the play are ultimately conservative, consolidating what he calls 'the normal relation', adding 'with sexual as with other relations, it is when the normal is secure that playful aberration is benign'.

Writing some thirty years later in an important article about attitudes to women in the play, Jean Howard made a different distinction, between Viola, whose gender transgression she saw as non-challenging, and Olivia, whose attempts to remain unmarried are the real threat to gender norms: 'the play seems to me to [valorize] the 'good woman' as one who has interiorized, whatever her clothing, her essential difference from, and subordinate relations to, the male. Put another way, the play seems to me to applaud a crossdressed woman who does not aspire to the positions of power assigned men, and to discipline a non-crossdressed woman who does'. It's a striking argument, but introducing ideas of trans complicates it, and makes us suspicious of a feminism that is more comfortably located in the cis female character.

Much gender criticism of *Twelfth Night* could do with refreshing. As the *Upstart Crow*'s Will Shakespeare predicted, we are only now getting to grips with the radically playful depiction of non-binary gender in literature's first genderqueer text.

## Further Reading

### Online References

Jacqueline Rose's article on trans, 'Who Do You Think You Are', is available on the London Review of Books website: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n09/jacqueline-rose/who-do-you-think-you-are>.

### Print References

C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton University Press, 1959)

Jean E Howard, 'Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39, No. 4. (Winter, 1988), pp. 418-440  
[<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2870706>]

C,N, Lester, *Trans Like Me: A Journey for All of Us* (Virago, 2017)

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